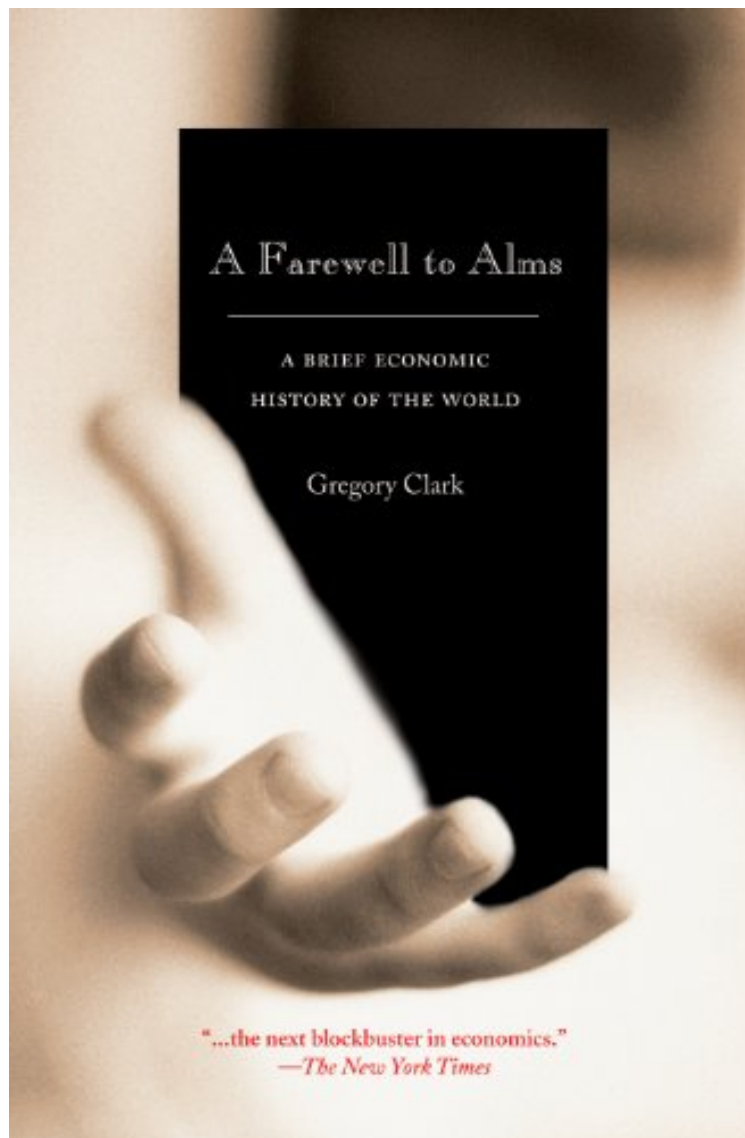


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## A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World (The Princeton Economic History of the Western World)

Gregory Clark

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**Gregory Clark : A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World (The Princeton Economic History of the Western World)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World (The Princeton Economic History of the Western World):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Important Book by a Real ScholarBy Patrick L. BoyleI bought this

book at least five years ago. Everyone seemed to be talking about it. I felt I had to read it in order to keep up. But I apparently wasn't ready. I put it aside. Now years later I still keep reading references to Clarke and his work, so I tried again. This time, I went through it fairly fast. It only has about 400 pages but most of them have a table or chart. It takes a bit longer to read than a book of just text. But the text and the exhibits are well integrated and well laid out. The argument proceeds clearly. It is on the whole an easy read. But I am a little surprised to see that as of today, there are only 62 reviews. This is a very influential and important work. But apparently it doesn't appeal to as many as I had imagined. This is tens times the book as any book ever written by Jared Diamond for example (I've read almost all of his books) but it seems to attract a much smaller readership. When I got to the last chapter in which professor Clarke concludes that why some nations are rich and others are poor still remains a bit mysterious, I had the answer which had eluded him. Or I think I did. About the same time period that this book came out there was another major economics book on the shelves - Lynn and Vanhanen's "Wealth of Nations". In that book they showed that national IQ differed around the world such that the nations with the smart populations were the rich nations. Clarke spends the penultimate chapter examining why Indian cotton mills were so much less efficient than British ones. He discusses in order - the equipment, the management, and the workers. The Indians bought the same equipment. They hired British managers. But the respective workforces behaved very differently. The same is true for Africa. No one tries anymore to develop Africa by just giving them money. Nor do they try to take advantage of all that cheap African labor. The aggregate quality of the workforce seems to be paramount. I was an economics major as an undergraduate. I was also a psychology major later. In psychology there have been thousands of studies with millions of subjects who took IQ or IQ-like tests. It is a very mature technology. Yet mental ability differences are almost never admitted in economics. I took a course in international development which was supposed to be broader than mere economics. It was supposed to be interdisciplinary. But it still restricted the independent variables to only those of economics. Economists usually restrict their models to that of the 'economic man'. All men are considered equal and operate identically according to incentives. So in light of that worldview, we have sent Peace Corps volunteers to Africa, we have opened schools, and we have provided them with expertise and capital goods. None of which worked. Clarke's book has provided a lot of evidence to support the view that all such efforts are doomed. We need to change the people somehow. I was familiar with development failures of recent years. Professor Clarke has shown me that these differences are much older. That wasn't his intention but that's what I took away from it. Finally I found that I admired Clarke. He has spent a lot of hours in a lot of libraries and parish churches and other repositories of ancient records. I admire climatologists who camp out on some glacier. I do not much admire climatologists who just stay at home and write to the Times. Clarke has a lot of citations in his book and many of them are to other books of his. He knows his stuff. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting and Detailed Argument By James Williams, Ph.D. One of the more interesting books I've read over the last several years. Clark sets out to examine the economic inequalities that exist among nations, and he provides mountains of data in the process. The central question is this: Given the ease with which poor countries can acquire modern technology, why is it that they remain poor? On its face, this situation is puzzling. He begins by examining some of the mainstream arguments for the great gap between rich nations and poor. One of the more interesting, of course, was Jared Diamond's, who proposed convincingly that geographical circumstances gave North Africa and Europe advantages in resources that other areas, such as Australia and North America, lacked. Clark accepts this proposal but notes that these advantages explain the rise of early civilizations in the Fertile Crescent but that they do not explain social and cultural history beyond those first organized societies. He then looks at the Industrial Revolution (IR) as the tipping point at which Malthusian mechanisms stopped influencing population growth, personal income, and technological advancement. His data show that in the 200 years leading up to the IR, England benefitted from stable government, low taxes, low interest rates, and ample agricultural yields, which allowed for the accumulation of personal wealth among those who worked hard, managed their money, and were what we might call "good citizens" in the sense that they displayed what today we know as a middle-class work ethic and middle-class values. These persons not only lived longer than those who did not have these middle-class characteristics--they also had more surviving children. Many more, and these children were educated into those same middle-class values. One consequence was that upon a father's death and the subsequent bequeathal of the estate to his children, there tended to be a steady shift downward in social rank. Over time, middle-class values became the norm throughout England (and then Northern Europe) as those with them phased out those without them through higher birth rates and greater longevity. The IR ended the Malthusian stability that had governed societies for millennia, greatly raising the personal incomes in England, Northern Europe, and the United States and thus initiating the modern period. Clark points out that the ease with which technology can be transported anywhere on the planet led many early economists to speculate that the benefits would soon become global. This did not happen, however, and at this point Clark's work becomes controversial. His data show that, although transporting technology to poor countries is easy, transporting the middle-class values necessary to use that technology effectively is not. Without those values, the efficiency required to use technology effectively does not exist. One of his more important examples is the textile industry in India, where productivity is a fraction of the level in the United States, even though the workers have the same equipment. His data show that India textile workers are productive only 10-15 minutes per hour owing to

absenteeism, frequent unauthorized breaks, and a failure to work at the same pace and level as American workers. If his analyses are correct, then the developed world's efforts to raise the standard of living in undeveloped countries are futile. It should be noted that although Clark's argument is compelling, there are several problems with the book. In some instances, his information is incorrect, as when he implies that slavery in Rome all but disappeared around 200 AD owing to some unknown social change. Actually, the explanation is straightforward: Approximately 80% of all Roman slaves were male, which meant that it was impossible for the slave population to renew itself through reproduction, especially when on those relatively uncommon occasions that a female slave became pregnant she was often freed. Thus, Rome relied on a steady stream of soldiers captured in combat to renew the slave population. But as wars became less frequent and less successful, there were fewer men to add to the slave population. In addition, the book was very poorly edited, with an abundance of punctuation problems and typos. Where have all the competent proof readers gone?

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A dazzling, provocative treatise. By RwcAs the Western world has stumbled into an accelerating social and economic decline of its own making, it seems more important than ever for us to understand how we got to where we were ... and where we are. Gregory Clark is a mathematical economic historian, and he will have none of the squishy "it-was-our-institutions" promoted by Daron Acemoglu and other economists, or even more contrived arguments based on geography and climate, as the reasons for the difference between the success and failure of nations. Rather it is the evolution of cultural behaviors over hundreds of years in northern Europe and particularly the UK, and perhaps the genetic alterations that at least partially underlie them. Clark considers the institutional explanation a non-explanation and brings reams of data, graphs and tables to the party, and a few production function equations as well. So this book is definitely not for sissies. But the book is far more ambitious than just the matter of the success/failure of countries. Clark wants to understand a number of interrelated issues:-- When did the industrial revolution happen? Was it a sudden transition (like a phase transition) or preceded by a long incubation period that simply accelerated under the right conditions?-- Why did it take so long to finally happen?-- How do we understand the pre-industrial revolution economy? (Ans: it really was Malthusian scarcity, in which population was the flywheel that would adjust so that everyone ended up with a subsistence living).-- Why did the industrial revolution actually decrease inequality in countries that participated in it, while increasing inequality across different economies?-- Why did poor countries actually become poorer while the rich countries get amazingly richer as the Industrial Revolution progressed? Some of the chapters are dazzling, almost breathtaking, while a couple seem either unclear or overworked. But the book is always engaging, provocative, and intelligent, with occasional spices of dry humor. Along the way Clark argues that economic knowledge actually peaked in 1800 since we can explain what happened before that time, but the field has failed miserably since then. Pointing out this seemingly obvious failure of the economics project is reason enough to be viciously attacked by the establishment. I was motivated to read this book as a carom shot from the recent Nicholas Wade book "A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History" which makes for another excellent companion read for those interested in these most pertinent and critical questions. It is also a very worthy co-read with Acemoglu and Robinson's "Why Nations Fail" which I found repetitive and unconvincing.

Why are some parts of the world so rich and others so poor? Why did the Industrial Revolution--and the unprecedented economic growth that came with it--occur in eighteenth-century England, and not at some other time, or in some other place? Why didn't industrialization make the whole world rich--and why did it make large parts of the world even poorer? In *A Farewell to Alms*, Gregory Clark tackles these profound questions and suggests a new and provocative way in which culture--not exploitation, geography, or resources--explains the wealth, and the poverty, of nations. Countering the prevailing theory that the Industrial Revolution was sparked by the sudden development of stable political, legal, and economic institutions in seventeenth-century Europe, Clark shows that such institutions existed long before industrialization. He argues instead that these institutions gradually led to deep cultural changes by encouraging people to abandon hunter-gatherer instincts--violence, impatience, and economy of effort--and adopt economic habits--hard work, rationality, and education. The problem, Clark says, is that only societies that have long histories of settlement and security seem to develop the cultural characteristics and effective workforces that enable economic growth. For the many societies that have not enjoyed long periods of stability, industrialization has not been a blessing. Clark also dissects the notion, championed by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, that natural endowments such as geography account for differences in the wealth of nations. A brilliant and sobering challenge to the idea that poor societies can be economically developed through outside intervention, *A Farewell to Alms* may change the way global economic history is understood.

Economic history often conjures images of musty tomes, bygone eras that no one knows about and in general, scholarship that is dry and difficult to relate to. Gregory Clark's new book *A Farewell to Alms* conveys a different image. Offering a sweep of history from the border between antiquity and the medieval age, the book is an attempt at tackling grand themes. From the Back Cover "What caused the Industrial Revolution? Gregory Clark has a brilliant and fascinating explanation for this event which permanently changed the life of humankind after 100,000 years of

stagnation."--George Akerlof, Nobel Laureate in Economics and Koshland Professor of Economics, University of California, Berkeley" This is a very important book. Gregory Clark argues that the Industrial Revolution was the gradual but inevitable result of a kind of natural selection during the harsh struggle for existence in the pre-industrial era, in which economically successful families were also more reproductively successful. They transmitted to their descendants, culturally and perhaps genetically, such productive attitudes as foresight, thrift, and devotion to hard work. This audacious thesis, which dismisses rival explanations in terms of prior ideological, technological, or institutional revolutions, will be debated by historians for many years to come."--Paul Seabright, author of *The Company of Strangers: A Natural History of Economic Life* "Challenging the prevailing wisdom that institutions explain why some societies become rich, Gregory Clark's "A Farewell to Alms" will appeal to a broad audience. I can think of nothing else like it."--Philip T. Hoffman, author of *Growth in a Traditional Society* "You may not always agree with Gregory Clark, but he will capture your attention, make you think, and make you reconsider. He is a provocative and imaginative scholar and a true original. As an economic historian, he engages with economists in general; as an economist, he is parsimonious with high-tech algebra and unnecessarily complex models. Occam would approve."--Cormac O'Grada, author of *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce* "This should rapidly become a standard work on the history of economic development. It should start whole industries trying to test, refine, and refute its explanations. And Gregory Clark's views on the economic merits of imperialism and the fact that labor gained the most from industrialization will infuriate all the right people."--Eric L. Jones, author of *Cultures Merging and The European Miracle* "While many books on the Industrial Revolution tend to focus narrowly either on the event itself, or on one explanation for it, Gregory Clark does neither. He takes an extremely long-run view, covering significant periods before and after the Industrial Revolution, without getting bogged down in long or detailed exposition. This is an extremely important contribution to the subject."--Clifford Bekar, Lewis and Clark College

About the Author  
Gregory Clark is chair of the economics department at the University of California, Davis. He has written widely about economic history.